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ABSTRACT

To explore characterizations of acts of political violence and their perpetrators, a study considered the most frequently used characterizations in the "Los Angeles Times," the "New York Times," and the "Washington Post" for the years of 1980-1985, and considered whether characterizations differed depending on their source. A total of 258 reports of 127 incidents of political violence were collected and analyzed. Findings revealed that a significant difference exists in the ways media personnel, government officials, and witnesses characterize acts of political violence and perpetrators of those acts. Media personnel and witnesses to the violence tend to use nominal characterizations (generally more neutral than those used by government officials), and government officials tend to use descriptive characterizations (often words that are more judgmental, inflammatory, and highly colored). Witness characterizations were, in fact, completely nominal. Further, findings showed that 94.3% of the characterizations were media characterizations (including headline characterizations and description, observation, and paraphrase in the article), while only 3% were direct quotes of government officials, and 2% were direct quotes of witnesses. This finding means that media quoted primary sources less than 6% of the time. (Ten tables of data are included.) (SR)

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Terrorism and the News Media Research Project

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CHARACTERIZATIONS OF ACTS AND PERPETRATORS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THREE ELITE U.S. DAILY NEWSPAPERS

Terrorism and the News Media Research Project

CHARACTERIZATIONS OF ACTS AND PERPETRATORS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THREE ELITE U.S. DAILY NEWSPAPERS

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This study considers the characterization of acts of political violence, commonly referred to as terrorism, in the Los Angeles *Times*, the New York *Times*, and the Washington *Post*, for the years of 1980-1985. The study was undertaken to explore characterizations of acts of political violence and their perpetrators. The study considers the most frequently used characterizations and whether they differ depending upon their source.

Characterizations were dichotomized into the categories of nominal and descriptive, depending upon their meaning. Nominal characterizations are nouns, verbal nouns (gerunds), or other words that label or describe the acts in a manner that merely indicates what happened. They are also words that label or describe the perpetrators, but with as little connotative meaning as possible. Nominal words are straightforward description with as few judgmental qualities about the acts or perpetrators as possible. Descriptive characterizations are often adjectival in form, although they may be nouns or verbal nouns, and contain judgments about the acts or perpetrators within their denotative or connotative meanings.

Nominal characterizations of acts of political violence include words such as "hijacking," "bombing," "shooting," and "attack." Nominal characterizations of perpetrators of such acts include words such as "hijacker(s)," "bomber(s)," "gunman(men)," and "attacker(s)." Descriptive characterizations of acts of political violence include words such as "murder," "despicable," "brutal," "criminal," and "terrorism." Descriptive characterizations of perpetrators of political violence include words such as "murderer(s)," "criminal(s)," "coward(s)," "freedom fighter(s)," and "terrorist(s)."

Method

Incidents selected for inclusion in this study were selected from among entries in the newspaper indices for the three papers using a quota sampling procedure. Because no single comprehensive listing of terrorist acts in the period exists, or is readily available from intelligence agencies, the universe from which the final incidents were selected included incidents of political violence listed under the headings of assassinations, airline hijackings, bombings, hostages, kidnappings, murders, shootings, and terrorism. The incidents included in the study were randomly selected from among those listed under each heading.

The chosen articles about each incident were individually read and questionnaires completed for each of the articles. A total of 258 reports of 127 incidents of political violence were collected and analyzed for this study. For each story, coders recorded the first three characterizations of acts of political violence and perpetrators of political violence made in quotes attributed to government officials and witnesses, as well as the first three nonquoted characterizations of the acts and perpetrators (i.e., characterizations made by the writer) and characterizations of the acts and perpetrators made in headlines.

Prior to implementing the questionnaire, intercoder reliability tests were made using the instrument. In tests using the Holsti intercoder reliability formula, ten paired sets of coders achieved an average reliability of .98, an indication of very high intercoder reliability.

After the characterizations were gathered, ten coders were asked to place each characterization found in the articles into either the nominal or descriptive category, based on the operational definitions given above, to create the list (APPENDIX 1) of nominal and descriptive terms so their use could be analyzed in this study.

Results

A combined total of 931 characterizations of the acts, i.e., events, of political violence were recorded. The five most frequently appearing characterizations were (in order) the words "hijacking," "killing," "bombing," "explosion," and "attack" (TABLE 1). The five characterizations alone accounted for 51.1 percent of the total.

TABLE 1

COMBINED CHARACTERIZATIONS OF ACTS

Rank	Characterization Word	Number of Uses	% of Total
1	Hijacking	142	15.3
2	Killing	97	10.4
3	Bombing	89	9.6
4	Explosion	88	9.5
5	Attack	59	6.3
6	Blast	54	5.8
7	Shooting	41	4.4
8	Seizure	38	4.1
9	Assassination	21	2.3
10	Slaying	19	2.0
11	Commandeered	17	1.8
	Hostage taking	17	1.8
13	Threat	14	1.5
14	Ambush	13	1.4
15	Siege	12	1.3

The second five most frequently used characterization words to describe the acts were (in order) "blast," "shooting," "seizure," "assassination," and "slaying." These five terms accounted for 18.6 percent of the total, bringing the total accounted for by ten terms to 69.7 percent.

The remaining characterization words that accounted for at least one percent of the total ranked 11th through 15th on frequency of appearance and included 7.8 percent of the total characterizations. The 15 characterization words accounted for 77.4 percent of the 931 characterization words recorded.

A combined total of 589 characterizations of the perpetrators were recorded in the study. The five most frequent characterization words used for the perpetrators were (in order) "hijacker(s)," "gunman(men)," "guerrilla(s)," "terrorist(s)," and "rebel(s)" (TABLE 2). The five top-ranked terms accounted for 63.7 percent of the total number of characterizations of perpetrators of political violence.

TABLE 2

COMBINED CHARACTERIZATIONS OF PERPETRATORS

Rank	Characterization	Number of Uses	% of Total
1	Hijacker(s)	159	27.0
2	Gunman(men)	76	12.9
3	Guerrilla(s)	55	9.3
4	Terrorist(s)	54	9.2
5	Rebel(s)	31	5.3
6	Leftist(s), Left-wing	23	3.9
7	Armed man(men)	14	2.4
8	Attacker(s)	12	2.0
	Extremist(s)	12	2.0
10	Rightist(s), Right-wing	7	1.2
	Nationalist(s)	7	1.2

Six additional terms each accounted for at least one percent of the total number of perpetrator characterizations. The terms ranked 11th through 15th. These words were "leftist(s), left-wing," "armed man(men)," "attacker(s)," "extremist(s)," "rightist(s), right-wing," and "nationalist(s)." Together these accounted for 12.7 percent of the total number of characterizations of the perpetrators of the acts of political violence, bringing the total for all terms accounting for at least one percent to 76.4 percent of the total.

The data were then separated by the source of the characterizations. Headlines and nonquoted material were included in a category of media characterizations, and classifications for government and witness characterizations were also considered.

A total of 858 characterizations of the acts of political violence were made in the media characterizations. The top five characterizations were "hijacking," "killing," "bombing," "explosion," and "attack" (TABLE 3). The top five words used accounted for 54.9 percent of the total media characterizations.

TABLE 3

MEDIA CHARACTERIZATIONS OF ACTS

Rank	Characterization	Number of Uses	% of Total
1	Hijacking	142	16.6
2	Killing	95	11.1
3	Bombing	85	9.9
4	Explosion	78	9.1
5	Attack	70	8.2
6	Seizure	52	6.1
7	Blast	34	3.9
8	Shooting	33	3.8
9	Assassination	21	2.5
10	Slaying	19	2.2
11	Commandeered	17	2.0
	Hostage taking	17	2.0
13	Threat	14	1.6
14	Ambush	13	1.5
15	Siege	12	1.4

The sixth through tenth ranked words were "seizure," "blast," "shooting," "assassination," and "slaying." The five words in this group accounted for 18.5 percent of the media total, bringing the percentage of the total resulting from characterizations ranked one through ten to 73.5 percent.

An additional five media characterizations each represented more than one percent of the total. These terms added 8.5 percent to the total number of media characterizations of the acts, bringing the total to 81.9 percent.

A total of 525 characterizations were made in the media of the perpetrators of the acts of violence. The top five characterizations were "hijackers," "gunman(men)," "terrorist(s)," "guerrilla(s)," and "rebel(s)" (TABLE 4). These five words accounted for 63.4 percent of the total media characterizations.

The words ranked six through ten were "leftist(s), left-wing," "extremist(s)," "armed man(men)," "commando(s)," and "attackers." These characterizations accounted for 15.1 percent of the total and bring the total for terms ranked one through ten to 78.5 percent. One additional term, "nationalist(s)," accounted for at least one percent, bringing the total accounted for by each term above the one percent threshold to 79.8 percent of all media characterizations.

TABLE 4

MEDIA CHARACTERIZATIONS OF PERPETRATORS

Rank	Characterization	Number of Uses	% of Total
1	Hijacker(s)	149	28.4
2	Gunman(men)	72	13.7
3	Terrorist(s)	41	7.8
4	Guerrilla(s)	40	7.6
5	Rebel(s)	31	5.9
6	Leftist(s), Left-wing	22	4.2
7	Extremist(s)	21	4.0
8	Armed man(men)	14	2.7
9	Commando(s)	12	2.3
10	Attacker(s)	10	1.9
11	Nationalist(s)	7	1.3

The portion of the data indicating the characterizations of the acts of political violence in the quoted words of government officials yielded 41 responses. The most prevalent characterization, accounting for nearly 15 percent of the total, was "criminal [act]." The second ranked response was "attack," and the third rank was held by five words with equal number of uses, "bombing," "brutal act," "seizure," "shooting," and "terrorism" (TABLE 5). These seven terms accounted for 51.3 percent of the total government officials' characterizations of the acts. Remaining were single responses unduplicated by any other officials' characterizations. Included in the remaining responses were "barbaric," "cowardly," "dastardly," and "despicable."

TABLE 5

GOVERNMENT CHARACTERIZATIONS OF ACTS

Rank	Characterization	Number of Uses	% of Total
1	Criminal Act	6	14.6
2	Attack	5	12.2
3	Bombing	2	4.9
	Brutal Act	2	4.9
	Seizure	2	4.9
	Shooting	2	4.9
	Terrorism	2	4.9

Forty-one quoted characterizations of perpetrators of those acts by government officials were also recorded. "Hijacker(s)" received the number one rank, accounting for 14.6 percent of the total (TABLE 6). The second most frequent characterization of the perpetrators was a tie between the "terrorist(s)" and "evil." These terms together accounted for 14.7 percent of the total. Three terms tied for the fourth ranked characterization. The terms "brutal," "criminal," and "right-wing" totaled an additional 14.6 percent, bringing the total for the characterizations of perpetrators used at least twice by government officials to 43.9 percent. Responses used only once included characterizations such as "cowards," "extremists," and "armed propaganda unit."

TABLE 6

GOVERNMENT CHARACTERIZATIONS OF PERPETRATORS

Rank	Characterization	Number of Uses	% of Total
1	Hijacker(s)	6	14.6
2	Terrorist(s)	3	7.3
	Evil	3	7.3
4	Brutal	2	4.9
	Criminals	2	4.9
	Rightist(s), Right-wing	2	4.9

Thirty-three characterizations of the acts were made by witnesses quoted in the news stories. The most frequently used characterization was "explosion," which accounted for 21.2 percent of the total (TABLE 7). The second most used characterization was "shooting," which accounted for 18.2 percent. Together the two terms contributed 39.4 percent to the total. The third most frequent characterization was "blast," which accounted for 12.1 percent of the total. Two characterizations, "bombing" and "seizure," tied for the fourth position, each amounting to 6.1 percent of the total.

TABLE 7

WITNESS CHARACTERIZATIONS OF ACTS

Rank	Characterization	Number of Uses	% of Total
1	Explosion	7	21.2
2	Shooting	6	18.2
3	Blast	4	12.1
4	Bombing	2	6.1
	Seizure	2	6.1

Eighteen characterizations of the perpetrators were made by witnesses quoted in the articles. Only two terms were used multiple times, and they were used an equal amount. "Gunman(men)" and "hijacker(s)" each contributed 22.2 percent of the total number of characterizations of perpetrators made by witnesses (TABLE 8).

TABLE 8

WITNESS CHARACTERIZATIONS OF PERPETRATORS

Rank	Characterization	Number of Uses	% of Total
1	Gunman(men)	4	22.2
	Hijacker(s)	4	22.2

Examination of whether media, government, and witness characterizations differed significantly was made using the Chi-square statistic. The pattern of characterization use by the three groups was shown to be highly significant, $p < .001$ (TABLE 9). Both media and witness characterizations tended to be nominal. In contrast, the majority of characterizations made by government officials were descriptive.

TABLE 9

SUMMARY OF CHARACTERIZATIONS OF ACTS AND PERPETRATORS

Source of Characterization	Nominal Char.	Descriptive Char.	Totals
			1121 (94.3%)
Media	927 (83%)	194 (17%)	39 (3.3%)
Government	17 (44%)	22 (56%)	29 (2.4%)
Witnesses	29 (100%)	0 (00%)	
			1189
Totals	973 (81.8%)	216 (18.2%)	

Chi-square = 40.21, with 2 degrees of freedom; probability $1 < .001$

Because most characterizations were made by media, the kinds of characterizations were compared to determine if there were differences between characterization of acts and perpetrators. One would expect no association between nominal and descriptive words and the object of the characterization. Using the Chi-square statistical test, however, it was revealed that a significant difference ($p < .001$) between media characterization of acts and perpetrators existed (TABLE 10). The data show that media characterizations tended to employ nominal words to characterize acts of political violence to a much greater degree than they did to characterize perpetrators. More than a third of the time, media characterizations of perpetrators employed descriptive terms.

TABLE 10

SUMMARY OF MEDIA CHARACTERIZATIONS

Object of Characterization	Nominal Char.	Descriptive Char.	Totals
			702 (62.6%)
Acts	670 (95%)	32 (5%)	419 (37.4%)
Perpetrators	257 (61%)	162 (39%)	
			1121
Totals	927 (83%)	194 (17%)	

Chi-square = 103.5, with 1 degree of freedom; probability $1 < .001$

Differences in characterizations of acts of political violence and perpetrators of political violence could not be measured individually for government officials and witnesses because the number of characterizations in each of the cells would be below statistically acceptable thresholds due to the small *n* for their characterizations.

Summary

This study reveals that a significant difference exists in the ways media personnel, government officials, and witnesses characterize acts of political violence and perpetrators of those acts. Media personnel and witnesses to the violence tend to use nominal characterizations, and government officials tend to use descriptive characterizations.

Media personnel and witnesses thus tend to use terms that are generally more neutral than those used by government officials. Government officials tend to use words that are more judgmental, inflammatory, and sensationalistic. A noteworthy finding of this study was that witness characterizations were completely nominal.

When considering differences in characterizations made by media personnel, a significant difference was found between characterizations of acts of political violence and characterizations of perpetrators of political violence. Although media personnel tended to use nominal words to characterize acts, they used descriptive characterizations for perpetrators about a third of the time.

No readily available explanation for this difference is apparent, although an examination of the words seems to show that they do not include some of the more inflammatory descriptive characterizations made by government officials. It may be that their use results from the semantic difficulties caused by lack of nominal words with which to characterize perpetrators of political violence.

A striking facet of the data is that 94.3 percent of the characterizations, 1121 out of a total of 1189, were media characterizations. These included headline characterizations and description, observation, and paraphrase in the articles. Only 3 percent of the characterizations were direct quotes of government officials, and 2 percent were direct quotes of witnesses.

This finding means that media quoted *primary* sources less than 6 percent of the time. That number is far below what would normally be considered good practice and may result from the fact that many of the stories were small or that media personnel could not reach public officials and witnesses or gain statements from them, or that they chose not to use statements when collected.

APPENDIX 1

CHARACTERIZATIONS LISTED BY TYPE

Nominal Characterizations

Abduction
Abductor(s)
Action
Armed man(men)
Assailant
Assassination
Attack
Attacker(s)
Blast
Blew up/Blow up
Bomber(s)
Bombing
Commandeer
Commando(s)
Destroyed
Explosion
Fire
(To) Force
Group
Gunman(men)
Hijacker(s)
Hijacking
Hostage taking
Kidnapper(s)
Kidnapping
Killer(s)
Killing
Occupation
Paramilitary unit
Theft
Threat(en)
Seizure
Shooting
Soldier
Violence

Descriptive Characterizations

Ambush
Anti-Semite(tic)
Armed Propaganda Unit
Atrocity
Barbaric
Brutal
Coward(s)
Cowardly
Criminal(s)
Criminal act
Dastardly
Despicable
Dissident(s)
Evil
Extremist(s)
Freedom Fighter(s)
Guerrilla(s)
Heroically
Insurgent(s)
Leftist(s)
Left-wing
Militant(s)
Murder(s)
Murderer(s)
Nationalist(s)
Neo-Fascist(s)
Piracy
Pirate(s)
Radical(s)
Radical (adj.)
Rebel(s)
Revolutionary(ies)
Rightist(s)
Right-wing
Sabotage
Saboteur(s)
Slaying
Suicide-bombing
Terrorist(s)
Terrorism

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